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Changing What Exactly, and From Where? A Response to Castree

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Abstract

Castree's essay advocates for Geographers to engage directly, and critically, with the new international networks and institutions giving shape and direction to the Anthropocene narrative. Reflecting on my own career in-and-out of Geography, I suggest that such 'fifth column' activity is not for all Geographers. Social change originates across many diverse venues and the intellectual seeds of critical Geographers seeking change to material practices and in cultural configurations need scattering to the winds, not merely planting in managed furrows.

Keywords Geography 'Future Earth' Co-Production Cultural Change Careers

Between Geography and Global Change Science

Noel Castree's challenge in this journal to Geographers, 'Changing the Anthro(s)cene: geographers, global environmental change and the politics of knowledge' (Castree, 2015a), is one of a series of related interjections he has made in the last year (Castree, 2014a,b; Castree et al., 2014; Castree, 2015b). It seems that Castree's interest in the institutional arrangements of what he calls Global Change Science (GCS), and the effects of these arrangements, was sparked by two things: the Planet Under Pressure Conference held in

London in 2012 -- at which Future Earth was launched -- and the surge of scholarly and cultural interest in the Anthropocene narrative. The specific question Castree is asking in these pages of *Dialogues* is what role should Geography and (in particular, human) Geographers play in these international research networks. Castree mentions me by name as an example of someone providing bridging intellectual capital between GCS and Geography and so it is initially worth offering a few words of reflection on my own career trajectory. I will return to address the challenge Castree is posing to Geography later in the commentary.

I studied for a BSc in Geography in the late 1970s/early 1980s and was awarded a PhD in a Geography department in 1985. My research was in the field of what I would now call climate-society interactions. I then lectured in 'physical geography' for four years in the mid-1980s, during which time I started teaching a course on contemporary climate change. In 1988, coincident with the rising swell of public and political interest in the idea of human-induced climate change, I joined the Climatic Research Unit in the School of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia. As Castree remarks, I 'left' Geography for nearly 20 years, returning intellectually to the discipline only around 2007 and returning institutionally, to King's College London, two years ago. I have reflected elsewhere at greater length on this career pathway (Hulme, 2011).

During those 20 years I was inducted into the 'new' discipline of climate science -- or what became known as Earth System Science (NASA, 1988) -- and into the institutional networks of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the precursor programmes of Future Earth (WCRP, IGBP, IHDP, Diversitas). *Nature*, *Climatic Change*, *Climate Dynamics* and *Global Environmental Change* became the journals of choice for published my work. The early years of this period, the late 1980s/early 1990s, were critical for the public framing of climate change as the pre-eminent example of global environmental change (a precursor narrative for the later idea of the Anthropocene) and as a problem to be solved through global collective action. Under this framing, climate science was the primary knowledge producer, with climate modelling as the pinnacle of sophisticated and policy-relevant knowledge generation. This knowledge fed the lower trophic levels of the epistemic ecosystem, but throughout this period the humanities and interpretative social sciences were mostly feeding elsewhere.

Sheila Jasanoff's idiom of co-production (Jasanoff, 2004) helps to explain some of the effects of this framing of climate and global change; that is co-production in the social-philosophical sense rather than in the practical-procedural sense in which Future Earth (and many others) are using the idea. For Jasanoff, the ways in which knowledge is made about the world cannot be separated from the ways in which that world is acted upon and governed. Not only was nascent GCS in the 1980s and 1990s constructing knowledge about climate which was global, but this 'global kind of knowledge' (Hulme, 2010) was shaping the types of policies and institutions that could be imagined in response. This co-production of

knowledge and social order is what Clark Miller has referred to as epistemic constitutionalism (Miller, 2009).

For a mid-career scientist there was something invigorating, if not intoxicating, about these years: generous research funding, access to policy-advisors in public, private and third sector organisations, consulting work on the side, international status and public visibility. The reflected glory of the IPCC's share of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize was a rather anachronistic manifestation of such public esteem. It was hard to maintain the poise -- suggested in Kipling's 1895 poem *If* -- as necessary for one to inherit the Earth: talking with crowds and keeping your virtue, walking with Kings nor losing the common touch.

Intellectual Comfort Zones

So why did I 'return' to Geography just under 10 years ago? Why did I withdraw my participation from the IPCC in 2002 after its Third Assessment Report and why have I looked on, and criticised (e.g. Lövbrand et al., 2015), Future Earth from the outside rather than actively engaging from the inside as Castree is now calling (human) Geographers to do? One over-riding reason was my growing realisation that the framing of climate change which I had bought into during the 1990s was too narrow and univocal. I believe it was my Geography training which gave me the instincts to initially start critiquing this framing from the inside, but I also realised I needed considerable intellectual re-skilling to develop the concepts and confidence needed to make a coherent and convincing argument. It was the discipline of History that initially provided me these skills (I undertook a postgraduate Diploma), followed by a self-taught introduction to STS and a much slower induction into anthropology and eco-criticism. (As an aside, Jerome Kagan's 2009 book *The Three Cultures: Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities in the 21st Century* offers a great starting point for such a journey).

With these new resources at my disposal – and now from the outside of GCS - I wrote *Why We Disagree About Climate Change* (Hulme, 2009) over the winter of 2007/8. The subsequent reaction to the book surprised me. Unknowingly, I had written a climate change text which seemed of not much interest to climate scientists and geoscientists, but which *was* of considerable interest to disciplines beyond environmental science. The book offered a framework for scholars, analysts and other professionals to engage with climate change on their own terms, rather than on the terms being offered by GCS or the IPCC. The central argument of the book was that it is necessary to reveal our (many) reasons for disagreement – our underlying beliefs and motivations - *before* we can act effectively in the world. The intellectual band-width which Geography occupies, and from which it launches its engagement with those outside Geography, now offered a natural home for me. After writing *Why We Disagree* an eventual return to a Geography department was perhaps inevitable.

So what of Castree's call, sharpening that made by Karen O'Brien (2013), for human Geographers to change the Anthro(s)cene by leaving behind intellectual comfort zones and 'established tramlines'? Should we human Geographers all be "participating in the networks and institutions of global change research" (Castree, 2015a: p.21) and engaging with Future Earth? There are two parts to this challenge. The first is strategic: what sort of research should human Geographers be undertaking? What do we see as our unique contribution to society and with what tone of voice do we speak? The second challenge is tactical: how best for human Geographers to conduct this research and from where should that voice be heard?

I fully support Castree and O'Brien in their first challenge. In O'Brien's words (2013: 593-594), "... human geographers have failed to shift the focus of the scientific discourse away from 'the environment' as the problem and towards an integrated understanding of change based on critical research on space, place, politics, power, culture, identities, emotions, connections, and so on, including the geography of care." Geography is well-placed to re-frame the challenges of climate change and to open-up the imaginative opportunities of the Anthropocene, as ones which exceed the merely material and technical and which instead embrace enthusiastically the political, ethical and spiritual.

Where Does Change Happen?

But with respect to the second challenge I am not convinced that all human Geographers should jump into the Future Earth cockpit and wrestle the controls from the geoscientists or even seek to place a moderating hand on the steering wheel. I accept the danger of programmes such as this to frame in narrow terms 'the problem' to be confronted and hence to place constraints on the imagination with regard to solutions. (Jasanoff's co-production and Miller's constitutionalism come again to mind). And mega-networks such as Future Earth can appear hugely successful in prising funding and gaining the attention of policy communities. But tactically it may nevertheless be wise for some, perhaps many, human Geographers to develop their work -- work which rises to the first challenge above -- outside the confines of such institutional configurations.

O'Brien (2013: 589) observes that "... a missing detail in pursuit of the great leap from knowledge to action may include a better understanding of how change comes about." And to this we should also add a better understanding of *where* change happens, or at least starts. Change starts in many different places: with social and religious movements, in diverse new cultural settings, through new technologies and by means of political convulsions. Change is often inspired through stories of meaning and purpose embodied and lived out in communities, neighbourhoods and networks. We kid ourselves if we think that the IPCC and Future Earth are the great agents of change in the world.

By way of illustration, I offer a number of social, cultural and academic movements which are engaging with the first of Castree's challenges, but which operate at varying distances from anything that would be recognisable as Future Earth or Global Change Science. I offer these not necessarily to endorse them, but as examples of places where change may find inspiration: an EcoModernist manifesto (Breakthrough Institute, 2015); 350.org and the fossil fuel divestment campaign (350.org; 2015); the Knowledge Learning and Social Change initiative (KLSC, 2015); The Dark Mountain project (Dark Mountain, 2015); the international campaigning network Hands Off Mother Earth (ETC, 2015); the forthcoming Papal Encyclical on Climate Change (The Tablet, 2014).

Put simply, I do not engage with Future Earth because I do not believe this is where the most important seeds of change are cultivated or sown, nor where my voice can most effectively be heard. I do not dismiss those who do, but instead I work as a Geographer in other ways: in changing educational curricula and by educating students; in engaging with media platforms, creative artists and civic society, not least with Christian networks and institutions; in opening up spaces for broad intellectual exchange (e.g. the journal I edit, *WIREs Climate Change*; see Hulme, 2014); and in writing books which seek a wide readership. Geography is a discipline which offers a flexible platform for reaching across and influencing these diverse arenas. What O'Brien suggests, and Castree seems to endorse, as excuses for *not* engaging with GCS and Future Earth may in fact be some of the very places where change (transformation if you will) can most likely begin.

Yes, let Geographers shift their attention to understanding the broader concept of change, how it occurs and then provoking it (O'Brien, 2013); yes, let Geographers unsettle the solidified knowledge hierarchies and their closed frames. But let us not all gather around one flag, least of all that of Future Earth or Global Change Science; let us not all become "potential fifth columnists challenging the present order from within" (Castree, 2015b: 3). There are other sites beyond scientific research networks where minds can be opened, assumptions challenged, ideas shaped and practices modelled.

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